

Passing Time

by Itsembarrasing

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1. Chapter 1

_I smile at the way the wind whips up his dark curls, lifting them then dropping them like kites on a windy day, crouching beside me he looks at me from under his long dust smattered eyelashes, I can't tear my eyes away, holding his attention for as long as possible, he doesn't seem to care; smiling at me as we have a precious few minutes away from the rest of our section. _

_Dropping his gaze to the ground he finds what he's looking for; a pebble, the smooth stone picked up, his wrist flicking 90 degrees and the pebble thrown gently into the air before being caught again, like a teenage boy he hands me the stone as if it's a childish gift, no words needed as the warmth shining out of his eyes replicates the heat that's coursing all the way to my heart from his touch. Resting his elbows on his knees, using his rifle to balance he sighs, I don't look but I know he's taking in the sunrise, the star rising above the snow topped mountains of Afghanistan casting an ethereal start to the day. "Do you ever get scared?" I ask quietly. _

"_Sometimes." The words are whispered, an admission, memories, thoughts being played out behind the dark brown eyes that I've come to love, that are the first image in my nut every morning when I wake, the last conscious thought when I fall asleep at night. He nods towards the peaks in the distance. "It would be hard to imagine never seeing the sun setting or rising again." _

"_There was me imagining' never gonna' feel a vodka and coke sliding down my throat againâ€¦..." _

"_Dawes." _

_When I look he's smirking, his bottom lip trapped under the

whiteness of his teeth as he stands up, his eyes shining with amusement. "Sir" I take his out stretched hand, accepting his offer to help my weary bones up from the damaged wall that was my temporary seat, his fingers prize open my clenched fist, his rough gloved hands harsh against my skin removing my precious pebble._

"_Look after this for me." He drops his voice, the words caressing my ear, I gasp as I feel his hands graze my hips, finding his way into the pocket of my combats, dropping the pebble into the fabric. His fingers linger for a minute, my hips pushing instinctively towards him, he places his hand on the softness below my flak jacket, exhaling a short laugh at my forwardness. "I might gonna' have to wait till we get back to Brize." _

These dreams are always the hardest to wake from.

****Running on Empty.****

April 22nd 2016

I'm weary, there's no other word for it, my legs are heavy as I swing them out of bed; balancing on the edge of my prison for the night, sighing, missing the heat yet glad to be away from the horrifying opportunity of dreams that it brings.

I try not to listen to the song that's woken me from the blackness of sleep, the words are too close to the truth, a cruel suggestion in the lyrics that's becoming an inconceivable dream that might never happen, making me feel, making me remember and as much as my own personal shrink tells me that's the only way to move on I refuse to. The fragments that come into my nut are enough, full scale reminiscing too bleedin' much. My fist comes down on top of the off button, the cheap alarm clock jumping on my bed side table, the song still continuing, mocking me until the last chord, with a deep breath I press it gently, reverentially in the hope the torture stops, then there's silence, leaving me with only the sound of my own breathing ringing in my ears.

Taking a moment I smooth my hair back, looking out the gap in the curtain; sunshine. It makes me smile, or grimace if I'm being honest, it would have to be bleedin' cloudless blue skies today, could it not be pissing down, snowing even, anything to make it easier not to remember the oppressive heat, the fragments of conversations in the still air. I look over at the rocking chair in the corner, I'd found it at a market, for some reason thinking that it might make my bedroom that bit more homely, but maybe the only way to do that is to put something personal in the bare white walled space, apart from my clothes it's devoid of anything remotely Molly Dawes, even my running clothes, organised and placed out the night before are black, regulation; a bleakness against the flaky untouched paint of the shabby seat that I've never had the calmness in my nut to sit in.

My heart aches as I head along the small hall to the kitchen, another day stretching ahead of me, it lifts slightly at the sound of a fridge closing, an unidentifiable discussion on a radio station that I'd switched off before heading to my pit last night meaning that I've got company, I'm glad, my first fix of human company for the day.

"Coffee Molls?"

Picking up my jacket from the back of the chair, I smile at Libby, my flatmate, my friend. "No thanks" instead I move over to stand beside her, waiting until she's filled up the kettle, moving into her space to let my sports bottle fill to the top with water, taking a sip, amusement on my face at her obvious walk of shame clothes "Good night?"

She looks down at her own clothes, her pulling outfit as she calls it, the fashionable minidress showing off her long legs that I'd die to have, then grinning at me before watching the kettle with a hint of shyness "Alright I suppose"

"Anyone I know?" This isn't the first time our paths have crossed in the kitchen at 5am, her returning from a night out, mine starting my day the only way I know how - pounding the streets until I forget whatever nightmare I'd suffered during the night.

"Nah don't think so" She turns to face me, stirring the coffee and sugar together before she adds the water, a habit she has, I've given up ever making it for her, telling her she has OCD but we both know she doesn't, well we've labelled it as a coping mechanism. "Welsh, so I don't think I'll be seeing him again"

It doesn't matter what country or county or town or village or even planet he came from, she wouldn't be seeing him again, my flatmate doesn't do relationships, the reason for it we never discuss. I'm sure her companion from last night is still asleep, blissfully unaware of her having done a bunk. "Do you think we should put the heating back on?" We both contemplate it for a few minutes, leaning against the chipped work surface, or take solace from each other, our default to converse about the monotonous when we're touching on dangerous subjects; were flawed, we know that.

"Sod's law, we put the heating back on and the temperature will rise"

"Yeah s'pose'" A yawn escapes, catching me unaware, my hand too late to cover my gob, I can't remember the last time I yawned at this time in the morning, normally I only yawn when I'm sitting up, refusing to hit my pit, watching shit on television or listening to crap on the radio; maybe it's progress my body starting to want to return to the warmth of my bed rather than run the streets of Clacton-on-Sea, but then I contemplate it for a second and the fear of that couple of hours where you head into a deep sleep, dreams even more vivid aren't worth it. I pick up my phone from the table, switching it on, those few seconds of hope but then it's gone as I look at the blank screen, I swallow against the disappointment, giving Libby a look that's meant to convey an air of control, she's watching me, not quick enough to remove the look of pity on her face.

"See you later eh?"

"I'll wake you when I get back" I'm heading out, my hand on the door handle as I turn, sticking my tongue out. Who says I can't do normal?

"Don't fucking bother Molls. I'm not seeing this day until it's dark again." And she's serious, at the weekend she could give a vampire a run for their money when it comes to sleep patterns.

My routine is the same every morning that I'm here, even down to stopping to speak to our next door neighbours cat, Harold. I think he knows that I can't cope with any kind of deviation, the loyal tabby sitting waiting patiently on the stairs for me, meowing, as if he's giving me attention for a few minutes before arching his spine; heading off, back to the comfort of his flat after a night of hunting.

It's always left that I take, though as the heavy door bangs loudly behind me I take a moment to look right too, taking another sip of water, motivating myself, ever since it happened I'm waiting. I get a grip; quelling the disappointment of hope. Taking my well worn path, the quickest way to get to the end of our street then heading east, towards the promenade where I can run, not having to worry about crossing roads, let my mind drift to nothing, ironically I've not lost my sense of self preservation, still wanting to live no matter how painful it is.

These mornings are the closest I feel to content, the cold air from the sea hurting my throat, scratching with each breath, only the sound of the seagulls and my harsh breathing, drowning out the sound of my feet pounding the pavement, if anyone had ever told me that I'd grow to love the sound of the sea birds I'd have laughed, told them to piss off, that it would mean that I was near water, I hated water but as I run, their angry squabbling sums up my internal feelings, makes me feel that I'm not alone in my fury with the world. I'm pushing myself this morning, sprinting, not just the last 50 but since I hit the tarmac outside the flat, exerting myself like never before, trying to run away from my demons but I can't, I should know that now, it's been 17,520 hours.

That day when I'd stood on the bridge in Afghan, a gun pointing in my face I'd made a promise to myself that if I got another chance I'd appreciate everything; a silent begging plea to whoever might be listening that I'd never take anything for granted again, life would become the greatest gift and I'd make my days on this earth count. It was a promise I never kept, I fell out with life, god, the world, distancing myself with each passing day, week, month and year. I can't bear to take in the breathtaking beauty of the sun rising to the East, a fear that if I do see the burnt orange beauty over the horizon that it'll get taken away from me. I stopped living that day, my heart now only beating to pass the time.

"Morning"

This is the only stop I do, my hands going to my knees trying to get my breathing back, smiling at my old mate, one of the chosen few in my world that I'm pleased to see. He's sorting the newspapers in the old fashioned display cabinet outside his small shop, I wait for him to finish carefully arranging, pride in his work, zipping my jacket up against the cold April wind when I straighten up, my breathing back to normal. If you walk 5 paces North you can look down a street and see the sea, he told me that, with pride when I'd first met him, it's been the only change to my route, since that day I've made sure that I pass his shop on my way back.

The first day I met him I couldn't get away from him, now with hindsight I wonder if he saw something in me, something that made other people keep away from me. He'd told me that his routine has

been the same for 17 years, every morning since his wife died, 148,920 hours I told him. 'Well' he'd said 'that's 131,400 hours of happy memories'. It was Bill who told me that he'd given himself 2 years to be angry, 2 years to question why every single minute of every hour of every day she'd been taken away until he realised he'd been lucky to have her in his life, that she'd been a gift. Him that had told me that I should give myself that amount of time and then there should be a cutoff, a conscious decision to move on. He hands me a newspaper, who'd ever have thought that I would read anything other than tabloid shit, but I figured if there's ever gonna' be any news it's going to be from this. it doesn't take me long to speed read the headlines of the first few pages, I hand it back "Usual shit" It's progress, I'd cemented my friendship with Bill when I used to come and buy every single newspaper, taking them back to the flat, reading them as I sat on the floor, my hands black with ink as word for word I searched for a name, but it was never there, well not after the first month.

"Any plans for today?"

My eyes well up, which is unusual, I don't cry, I wouldn't stop. I dip my head so he can't see me "Not sure" An image comes into my mind of the valium sitting in my bed side drawer, the comforting thought of taking enough to let me slip into a sleep; to hibernate for a day but I've tried that before, the usual story of my life - sleep equals dreaming, dreaming equals nightmares, no I'm gonna' have to face it out. "I was thinking of maybe heading somewhere, I'm not sure though."

He nods as if he understands "Anniversaries are the worst."

"What do you mean?"

"2 years ago today Molly"

"How?" I can't speak, I've never told him dates, not told anyone because then this happens, people want to put a time limit on, start judging how your feeling by the ticking of a clock "How do you know?"

Shrugging, he bends to slice his pen-knife through the twine on another stack of papers, his knees creaking as he bends down, taking his time to answer. "Put two and two together, it made the news."

I knew that, I had all the articles in my room, there were moments I'd wake and forget his face, though the pictures they'd used; his official army one, his wedding picture and a grainy image of his university days didn't reflect him, the man I'd come to know, didn't stop me panicking that one day I'd forget. The articles never mentioned me though, didn't talk about how he'd given up his life for mine, a selfless act of bravery, I wish it had been me, some days I can't breathe, rage crawling through my veins for him putting me through this, leaving me, my life empty without him. "I'll give you a piece of advice" He looks around him, pulling at his beard, his old intelligent eyes turn to look at me, concern shining out of them. "Find someone to spend today with, someone you could talk to, it's going to be a hard one"

**Can I please just ask that if you don't mind my writing (if you do I completely understand why and don't blame you) that you give this a

couple of chapters, I'd like to thank Jenmc, Bananagirl and the fabulous Emma and Natalie for giving me the courage to post this, as you can guess I needed to make sure it passed muster before hitting the publish button. As I'm sure you know I am all about the HEA, it'll maybe just be a rocky couple of chapters before we get there. Anyway I'm away to hide my head in the sand...**

2. Photographs

**Thank you for being lovely about this story, it means a lot as I really really wasn't sure about publishing - I've had to hit the wine to hit the button, mind you nothing unusual there and really any excuse when I'm on holiday with two children and the parents have adopted 2 orphaned lambs. I do have a fair amount of this story ready, just a few tweaks so I'll try and upload quickly because I'm not sure that this story works with the first few chapters not being uploaded quickly. Anyway I'll let you get on with it...oh and finally I might have liked listening to Ed Sheerans Photographs when I was writing this :)

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"Ahh it's the girl with the sad eyes" He opens the door, letting me in, I have to duck under his arm then I turn and smile at him, it's been six months since I last saw him but he's aged, as if in the last few months someone's taken a pen and drawn a few more worry lines, shaded his hair with a block of charcoal. I suppose that's what it does to you, maybe I've aged too but apart from checking in the mirror to make sure I've not put eye shadow on my cheekbones I don't look too closely. "Come on through Molly, my wonderful wife has been baking."

I can smell the aroma as I make my way along the draughty hall, as always I tip my head up, looking with wonder up the stairwell, the floors that I've never seen, it's like being a child visiting a stately home or Buckingham Palace, knowing but never seeing the opulence behind closed doors. The sound of a cooker door slamming shut brings me back, she's not a good baker everyone knows that, even her, but as she says maybe one day when it matters she can produce a cake, though as her husband pointed out, maybe she should just plan on buying one. It's one of the reasons that I find this place a comfort, they joke, they pretend to carry on as normal and they accept me, not that I push it, once a year is enough, okay three so really I've met them six times, well seven 'cause they've turned up at my flat a few times, only 'cause they were passing, came in for coffee, said nice things about the flat. Even Harold graced them with his presence, which as I told them is an honour, but there was someone important missing, there always is.

"Goodness dear, have you lost more weight" The hug encompasses me, the kitchen warmer, homelier, she's taller than I am, like her son but doesn't quite reach his lofty heights, the top of my head comes to her ears, which means she can plant a kiss on my cheek at the same time. "I think I've bloody managed to bake a cake which hasn't sunk in the middle. You need fattening up, young lady." Her attention goes back to watching her creation, her tongue trapped between upper teeth and bottom lip, her head nods towards the table. "And take your coat off Molly."

George has placed himself there, sitting, his back rigid with

straightness, a newspaper spread out on in front of him, easy to see what they were doing before my hastily arranged visit, without even looking he pats the chair next to him, his head turning slightly towards me as he continues to read an article. "How's your new posting going?" He was in the army too, the grand position of Colonel before he retired, as he said there was only so long you could expect your family to be at the beck and call of your career, though as he was 55 when he finally hung up his boots, Judy had pointed out that he'd left it quite long before being selfless.

"Yeah, fine, my CO's alright, wants me to go for Lance Corporal, again." I'm aware that I'm looking apologetic, guilt that I've still got a career to think of, anyway motivation hasn't been something I've had a lot of, thinking forward to the future almost impossible.

A pair of sharp brown eyes looks at me over the top of reading glasses, I call it his Colonel Bossy Boots look, his forehead furrowed with lines of his life, bushy grey eyebrows brought together. "And what's stopping you this time."

"Enough George, really, have you no manners?" Judy interrupts, her face pointed towards the glass door of the antiquated cooker. "Molly, ignore him." Straightening up she turns toward him, her finger pointing accusingly "Don't put her off coming to see us."

I'd never have thought that 1 year and 44 weeks ago I would have this welcome, that they'd accept me, even with the sadness and guilt I feel privileged.

It had been a bleak June day that I'd sat in a cafe in London, watching the rain hitting of the windows, drinking a bitter coffee and knowing that I needed to be as close to him as I could. The only information I had was that they lived in Bath, with a feeling of failure BT had informed me that there were a bleedin' 40 James' in Bath, each one I'd google mapped, until I was left with a list of 15 people who lived in old houses.

Pressing my head against the train window as the scenery changed, I hadn't known if the feeling inside me that I was coming home was instinctive or whether I was kidding myself, obviously it would have been the latter, the train station when I alighted was like a foreign country, moments of indecision spent looking at the departures board and wondering if I should get straight back on the train to London, then I'd berated myself, knowing I had apologies to make and cursing my weakness before heading out into the dismal grey day clutching my list of addresses.

With a sense of failure I'd sat on a bench in the diminishing light, only half the addresses on my list scored off, staring at the impressive circle of houses, my eyes searching for No 20; scared; petrified. I hadn't wanted him to live in a house like this, for the first time I doubted if we'd ever have worked, the divide between us too much, if this is where he called home then surely he'd never consider a girl from a housing estate in London, or even if we did what would we talk about, the differences for a moment too much between us. The rain had started gently, lulling me into thinking that it would drizzle out meaning that I hadn't noticed when the drops had got bigger, insistent in their desire to fall, only my tears were glad of the dampness, mingling with the salty trickle that

escaped realising that I'd failed, that I would never find him. I'd stood, my bones cold and it was then that I noticed him; the tall figure standing under an umbrella; watching me. I'd stared back for a moment, then dropped my gaze, my shoulders hunching as I started to walk, to find my way back to the train station and back to the reality of my life when he'd coughed, cleared his throat, enough for me to pause and look at him again.

"_Are you looking for someone?" _

I hadn't been able to answer him, my shoulders shrugging about to walk off again when he spoke, his words quiet.

"_What can make a young girl like you so sad?" When I'd looked up at him, his eyes had been dead too, a look as if he hadn't slept for days, weeks, months. "Quite often we get tourists who sit out here, you know Jane Austen" He'd exhaled a laugh, then stopped his features crumbling with worry as I'd cried, dirty great fat snotty tears. "But they don't tend to be staring at our house for hours on end crying."

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"_You sound just like him." I'd hiccuped, trying to stop the tide of emotion. _

"_Ahhh" He'd shifted uncomfortably and for a moment I'd believed that he would leave, having put 2 and 2 together but he hadn't, when I dared to look at him though the tears his eyes had a glimmer of something in them, kindness. "Let me guess you knew my son." _

_I'd nodded guiltily, my voice barely more than a whisper. "I was the medic." _

"_What's your name?" _

"_Molly" _

_He'd smiled, holding the umbrella towards me, offering me sanctuary. "Come in Molly, my wife is desperate to meet you." _

Judy gives up watching her cake, slinging her tea towel over her shoulder, moving over to switch the kettle on, she doesn't even ask me, reaching up to get a mug from the cupboard and putting a tea bag into it. There's a pause, then her hands rest on the worktop, as if she's supporting herself, I look to George, he's watching her too, concerned, then she straightens, clasping her hands together "How is Libby doing Molly?"

"Alright, shagged a Welshman last night."

She giggles, it always makes me smile, a youthfulness to it that before everything went to shit would have shown that she enjoyed life, found the best in it. She pours boiling water into the cup, shaking her head as she takes her time to move the teabag around the cup, the spoon clinking against the side as she starts to speak. "She's some girl."

"Wish there had been more of those kind of girls when I was growing up." George grunts.

The cup of tea is placed in front of me, perfect colour, she maybe

can't bake a cake but Judy certainly knows how to look after her guests, her husband is treated to a slap on the side of his head, his reaction to laugh, smiling lovingly at his wife before going back to read his paper. I take a sip, my mind trying to think of something to say, but the silence is filled as Judy turns up the antiquated built in radio, the crackle of the reception drowning out the music that's filling the room as she starts to hum along, her hand conducting an imaginary orchestra, watching her cake as she does. She once told me that Charles and Rebecca had bought her a DAB radio for Christmas, that her son had looked shamefaced as the present had been handed over, raising his eyes as she'd gushingly told her daughter in law how she loved it, that she didn't think the radio in the kitchen would hold up much longer and she'd been thinking of buying one. It now sat in a drawer, awaiting her ex daughter-in-law's weekly visits to be brought out.

Opening the oven door, Judy lifts the cake onto the worktop, pressing cautiously on the slightly darkened crust, with a sigh she takes off her liberty printed oven gloves and deeply inhales, her eyes widening as she does. "What do you think Molly?" I get up and go over, standing beside her, nodding towards a sharp knife.

"Are you not meant to put a skewer or something in it? Make sure it's cooked through."

"Don't know dear never got this far before."

Lifting up the knife, I grin at her, gently pushing the sharp blade into the sponge, pulling it back out, the blade clean, looking at her worried face with happiness, "I think you've bleedin' done it, that's alright."

Her face, that's an advert to good skin care creases into a smile, a smile slowly makes it's way up to her eyes which have one lone tear spilling out, the lump in my throat nearly chokes me, but I hold it together. "When he comes back I can bake him a cake." She wipes the tear from her face, then grasps my face, her thumbs stroking against my cheeks as she stops the tides of tears that I have no control over. "Now Molly, I need you to go through some things with me."

I follow her up the staircase, gripping onto the bannister, my mind can't help wondering if he'd ever have really invited me here, he might have told me that he was inviting me for Christmas but would he? If things had been different would it have been him and I walking up these stairs with a bleedin' carpet that doesn't go to the edge, it must be fashion 'cause surely they could afford one what fit. "The bossman said that this place was magical at Christmas."

She stops as she reaches the landing, turning and raising one perfectly plucked eyebrow in my direction "Molly, I really think you should start calling him Charles. It's a frightful name but well, it does suit him. Not that I'd tell my mother-in-law that." Continuing she passes rooms, doors as tall as the ones downstairs, none of them are open so I can't peek in, then she starts on another flight of stairs.

"It don't feel right." I speak up to her, the pictures on the wall here becoming more personal than the ones on the first flight, my pace is slower as I take them all in; school, university, army, lives that I was never part of, reminding me how little I know about him.

When we returned to the UK it had been easy enough to find out his first name, it was on every bleedin' newspaper article, Captain Charles James, in a way it did suit him but if I'd got the chance I'd have taken the absolute piss out of him for it, sometimes even when I say it in my nut I get the urge to start giggling but to say it out loud well, no, he'd never given me the go ahead to call him that, in fact he'd never even told me what his first name was. Funny how you can fall in love with someone, give up the rest of your life for them and not even know what they were called. "He'd be well pissed if I broke ranks 'n' called him that."

"I class you as a family friend Molly, so I'm giving you permission to call him that." Opening a door she winks at me, inviting me in "You may even call him Charlie if you're ever feeling incredibly annoyed with him, he hates that."

Sitting cross legged on the wooden parquet flooring, I ignore the ache on my arse and ankles, holding my hand out for the next photograph that Judy passes me, I'm surrounded by him, letters, photo's even his first curls in a small glass container, in a way it's too much but like an addict I want more, my eyes greedily taking in every detail. "I think that was his first tour" she peers over the top, her eyes scrunched for a second as she recalls. "Yes it was" The boy in the picture, because he's not yet a man makes me grin, searching his face, the dimple that I can't remember now, the hair without curls as if he thought that would help him be taken seriously in the scary world of the army. It's the next picture that's passed to me that makes me gasp, this one is him, the man I know, a technicolour reminder of how my heart would always beat faster when I saw him, my finger traces his outline, it's as if I'm back there for a minute, god I'd do everything different. "You can keep that if you want." It's in my pocket before she's even completed the sentence, her grey curls back to looking through the latest box, on one side a definite pile for Sam's school project on the other, a pile that could possibly be for Sam's school project; we're not doing well at this, not wanting to leave anything out.

"How is Sam?" I ask, respectively folding a letter until I can't see the words that ain't for me, placing it on a new pile, one for his son when he's older.

Judy brings her head up, lifting the glasses onto her head, "Growing, looks more and more like his father everyday. You need to see him again Molly." She smiles, the boastful look of a proud grandma. "He asked for you the last time."

"Bet you Rebecca didn't."

We both laugh, giggling like school kids in the high ceilinged spare room which is probably the size of my flat, the space is empty apart from the memories laid out before us, the sounds from our amusement echoing around us. Wiping a tear away Judy bites her bottom lip. Lets just say that Sam and I have bonded, it were easy, all I did was tell him one story about his dad and we were good friends. Unfortunately that story involved one of the many occasions that his old man told me to piss off but in my defense there were very few conversations that we had where he didn't. It was like a term of endearment towards the end always said with a grin or a lip bite or if I was really lucky his hand would come towards me as if he was gonna' touch me or hug me before he would remember where we were and it would go back in

his pocket, a moment of tension in his perfect frame and he'd get all business like again. Though I'd get round that with a cheeky comment so it would normally end with a head shake as he walked off, sometimes he'd even walk a couple of paces then I'd hear a snort as if he was laughing. Now whenever his son and I are in the same room he comes bounding over his familiar brown eyes begging for another story. I'm running out of them now, having to make them up, Sam calls them the 'piss stories'. Apparently in Waitrose a few months ago, he'd waited until the queue got really busy before exclaiming in a loud voice that his 'Daddy likes to check people's piss.' The whole queue was tutt'n' and Rebecca says that she's too embarrassed to go in there again, but she's not that bothered 'cause she says that it's only because of their gin selection and she's found a great internet site. Anyway who classes piss as a swear word?

I also bought him the Game of Thrones books for when he was older, you know how it's the law or something these days that you've got to buy the entire Harry Potter set well I thought I'd be a bit different. I'd never seen the bleedin' programme had I. In Rebecca's favour, she had hugged me, whispered in my ear that I was taking Charles's place in buying a present that weren't right for their son. I liked Rebecca, she liked me to the point we were even facebook friends, it always surprised me seeing as for the last few days of the tour I'd felt a jealousy towards her unlike anything I'd ever felt before. "I remember one year, Christmas 2012 I think, anyway" Judy leans over conspiratorially, her knee resting on top of old school reports that seemed to have a lot of excellents on them. "Charles was on deployment, Afghanistan." She takes in a deep breath of sadness. "It was a last minute tour, obviously he'd volunteered, he hadn't time to get organised so left his cousin to buy Sam a present, poor child was given aâ€¦". She's interrupted by the creaking of the old door, both of us turning round to see an apologetic George.

"Sorry but that's nearly 8pm, you know you're more than welcome to stay Molly but if you want a liftâ€¦"

"God yeah, sorry, I'd better get back."

Both of them come to the station to see me off, I suppose in a way I'm a link to their son, one of the few that was last to see him, that can tell them that up to that point he was happy, doing the job he loved. I'm hugged; twice, Judy holding onto me. "You promise that you'll come back to see us Molly."

The words are so close to what he once asked of me, my answer had to be the same. "I will."

3. Don't Go Far Off

****Hopefully this will answer a few questions for people :) Still a bit angsty but we will get there I promise, Molly's wit, charm and beautifully tenacious nature will be shining through soon. I'd kind of started this story as a challenge to look into how when you had found the 'one', which I believe they were to each other, that someone as strong as Molly wouldn't let go in the circumstances that my silly brain has come up with. Anyway thanks to those that are still sticking with this :)**
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"Good weekend?"

"Alright" I slide my bag onto my desk, looking round the classroom, yet again I'm one of the first, sliding into my seat like a huffy teenager. I'm 12 weeks into my A level English literature, my highest grade so far a C+, unbeknown to everyone else I'm bleedin' ecstatic about it, I even phoned my mum to tell her. "Didn't get my homework done though, did you?"

Tony's sitting, his upper body resting across the top of his desk on the other side of the aisle, his blue eyes twinkling. "Of course not, where would the fun in that be?" His fingers start drumming on the edge of the plastic desk, his head cocked to the side. "At least you've got a good excuse."

"Have I." Grinning I take my set text out, the spine of the book still intact, I'm nowhere near finding out anything 'bout Hussein's narrative in Chapter 17 of this book, never mind what the question papers might ask this year.

"You not been on exercise or" Tony lifts his shoulders up to his ears "Whatever it is you do in the army."

Giggling, my attention away from my fellow classmate I watch our teacher making his way to the front of the classroom; he's happy, bouncing on the soles of his feet as he walks to the front. I often wonder if he'd been my teacher at school would I have engaged more, his love for the subject contagious to all around. Placing his satchel on the desk, he catches me watching him, there's something about him that reminds me of Qaseem, the kindly Afghan interpreter who became a friend, eyes full of intelligence, warmth, an empathy as he returns my smile, looking away I give my attention back to Tony, grounding myself. "We do get weekends off you know, and anyway the Army are sponsoring me through this. Unless there's another bleedin' war they'll do anything to make sure I get here."

"Do you think?" Tony leans over conspiratorially towards me, he's tall, lanky, allowing him to close the distance enough so that our tutor Mark can't hear us "That the fact I went out and got pissed at the weekend will be a good enough excuse for me?"

"Dream on mate, I'll be dobbing you in, anything to get the attention of me."

The class starts filling up behind us, a decisive clearing of a throat bringing the loud chat to a minimal whispering, the noise level of scraping chairs dropping as people settle. "Let's start off with our poetry assignment" Even Mark looks amused at the jovial groaning that starts within the group of us, he turns towards the smartboard, his loopy handwriting writing words on the board, emotions; happiness, joy, love, passion, grief, then with a pile of papers he walks up the aisle, stopping briefly at each of us. "Pablo Nerudo is a Cuban born poet". He hands me a sheet "Any volunteers to read this." I shake my head, like everyone else in the room, looking down at the typed words, trying to put them into sense then Mark's voice fills the room; confident, strong:

Don't go far off, not even for a day, because -

because - I don't know how to say it: a day is long
and I will be waiting for you, as in an empty station
when the trains are parked off somewhere else, asleep.
I stop breathing.

Don't leave me, even for an hour, because
then the little drops of anguish will all run together,
the smoke that roams looking for a home will drift
into me, choking my lost heart.

The familiar swelling of my heart starts at the expressions that fill up every day of my life, inflaming until my breathing is laboured, my head going light as I struggle to get oxygen to my brain. Focus. I need to focus, use my coping strategies. The image being played out in stunning technicolour glory is torture, the visual beauty of the landscape of Afghan with a scene of horror playing out in front of me, the cacophony of panic around me, pulling me further and further in.

Oh, may your silhouette never dissolve on the beach;
may your eyelids never flutter into the empty distance.
Don't leave me for a second, my dearest,

I count to 10, a deep breath in on each even number, a deep breath out on the odd numbers; the previous unfolding scene being replaced until I'm standing on an unknown beach, the rolling white tipped waves crashing in front of me, the noise calming as it drowns out the voices of my past; the screams that haunt me everyday, then there's comfort, my visualisation bringing me peace, hope - in my mind I'm looking down, I smile, a calmness in my gut, my hand gripped tightly in another's and I know when I look up he'll be smiling, the gentle curve of his lips, a hint of humour shining out of his eyes; he's peaceful.

because in that moment you'll have gone so far
I'll wander mazelily over all the earth, asking,
_Will you come back? Will you leave me here,
dying?_

"...Molly?...You alright?... Molly"

Opening my eyes, blinking against the garish white lights, being met with a concerned look, I smile, nodding my head. There's a hum from the lights, nothing else. Somehow the typed words are blurred, then I realise that they're smudged from my tears. "Sorry" I mumble, sniffing, using the sleeve of my thankfully long sleeved t-shirt to dab at the moisture.

"You've lost someone you love" Mark says it as a statement, his expression intense when I look up at him, I only nod, swallowing

against the tide of tears. "I didn't realise sorry or I wouldn't haveâ€¦"

"It's fine." I interrupt, "It's been over 2 years I should really be getting my act together." Smiling apologetically I look round at everyone. There's nothing but compassion from each and everyone of them, my head drops in shame. He looks at the rest of the class as if he's wanting to give me a break, time to compose myself. "What do you think the author is talking about?"

The question's not directed to me but I answer. "I dunno'?" Flicking the edges of my specially bought notebook, the colourful paper fanning as the air flutters against me; I wait till my heart stops thumping; then I speak; whispering "She doesn't wanna' live without someone, she really loves them, she'd die if they weren't about." I've had years of therapy now, the sessions mostly involving me avoiding any reflection of the past but for some reason I feel the need to share; the burden of life suddenly too much.

"Are they saying that they would actually die?" His soft footfalls come back towards me, asking gently, for a minute he's only talking to me, there's no one else in the room.

"No, but, she said she was dying, so if he weren't there then wellâ€¦."

"Are they being figurative?" He interrupts, probing.

"Speaking from experience then yeah, it's just a very slow lonely deathâ€¦"

Someone clears their throat, a sound of shuffling feet, no other sounds in the classroom as he looks in my direction but it's as if he's somewhere else, his mind trying to work something out, pulling himself up he sits on the desk, picking up a book, looking down as he opens at a random page, closing it again decisively, then he meets my gaze again, his eyes softening as he asks; "Does she still have hope?"

"We've all got to have hope mate." It's not the first time I've ever said those words, fighting against the memory of the time I knelt beside a bloke who was dying, his internal injuries too much, the heat of the Afghan sun beating relentlessly down on us, the drips of sweat rolling down my back as I tried to save him; unsuccessfully and then to find out he'd died for me, my mind point blank refusing to add up the tally of people's lives affected by me. "If we don't have hope what do we haveâ€¦"

He asks, a hint that in his own way he's trying to change the subject. "Why do you think she's a female?"

The question is unexpected, I look at him confused, thinking, then I give up. "I dunno', it feels like it's written by one, only a female would think like that.."

"You underestimate the opposite sex Molly." He pushes himself to standing, his focus now going round the rest of the class "Pablo Neruda is in fact male. But." Pausing, his audience captive, he waits for his moment, like an actor waiting for the audience to still. "It makes my day when a student engages, puts themselves in the words and

that Miss Dawes is I believe what you have done. Good."

The rest of the class goes past without incident, my embarrassed cheeks back to their normal colour, it's when I'm packing up, placing my books in my backpack that Mark comes back over to me, crouching down beside my desk. "Have you started the Kite Runner?"

I have a guilty conscience that no matter how much I try I can't get past the first chapter. "I have started it."

"But"

Letting out an exclamation I sit back down again, looking at Mark, "I just can't get into it, I dunno' I'm too thick to read it."

He shakes his head, I've amused him, laughing he answers me "No you are not Molly."

"Is there any other book I could do?"

"Of course" Standing, stretching he turns to head to get me a list.

"Preferably one that ain't got anything to do with shittin' Afghanistan." I add as an important afterthought.

"Were you out there?" He asks as he sorts through an untidy pile on his desk, looking for the set reading list, I've stood up and followed him over, everyone else having left the room.

"Yeah. That's where it happened."

Blinking a few times he looks at me, automatically switching off the overhead projector as he does, I almost wish he'd turn it back on, the silence making the pause almost loud as he considers what he says, then he looks sad, for me, his tone as if it all makes sense now. "That's where you lost someone?"

"And everyday fucking day I wait for him to come back." He looks at me with surprise, then the expression in his eyes change to concern, probably 'cause he thinks that it's just a simple case that I ain't accepted it. I elaborate for once; tears pricking the back of my eyes as I hesitantly let the burden of the truth finally leave my lungs. "He didn't die that day, he was taken, the Taliban they took him hostage, well they wanted me but him being the bloke that he was offered himself up. I let him go."

**Thanks for asking about Invincible sorry I am trying to get it to some sort of conclusion, but still finding it difficult. I'll keep on bashing away with it and hopefully at some point will feel it's alright to publish. **

4. Where Have All The Superheroes Gone

**This had originally been two chapters but I think it works better together. Really really big thankyou to you all for being positive about this storyâ€|. **

Huge drops of water are falling from the heavy grey sky, the drains

unable to cope with the sudden deluge as puddles form on the pavement. Tony and I hold our jackets over our heads as we rush to the pub; his hand on my elbow trying to get me to keep to his pace as we race to take cover from the monsoon summer weather. I want to tell him to let go, the contact sitting uneasy but I suppose this should be considered normal, nothing untoward in him thinking it's okay when for the last 5 weeks we've started the habit of going for a drink after our class, even meeting for a coffee on the odd weekend. Though I know we're after different things; him a romantic relationship, me - trying to get some normality back in my life. He turns and smiles as the heavy pub door swings shut after us, I remember to smile back, taking my jacket off and letting the drops of water hit the floor. "Let's get a seat." Not waiting for an answer he heads off, I do what I always do; scanning the area to make sure that there is no one I know, that I don't have to beat a hasty retreat, though the chances of running into eight ex-colleagues is minimal, I haven't in the last 2 years so why I should worry about it now I don't know but it's habit. Tony waves at me again from the bar, a hint of patient tolerance on his face as I've not noticed his previous attempts at getting his attention and realising he's found us a table, I head over in the direction of his outstretched arm, hanging my jacket on the back, sitting, trying to keep thoughts out my nut, looking at him as he comes over placing the bacardi and coke in front of me, sliding into the seat opposite me and starting a conversation, his mouth moving but the words aren't reaching my ears. Occasionally I smile, a calculated one which is intended to convey some sort of agreement, an acknowledgment that I'm paying him some attention but I'm not. My mind is thousands of miles away in a god forsaken country called Afghanistan; the floodgates of memories having been opened tonight with just one brief conversation with my tutor. If I closed my eyes, shut out the sound of music playing from the stereo behind the bar it would be as if I was still there, easily transporting myself back there 'n' the feeling of the heat, the flies and the way the acrid dust stuck to the inside of your nostrils:

His words were breathless as he spoke, his hands in the surrender position as he walked towards us. "You're outnumbered, put the gun down" he'd said, his eyes flicking uncertainly between my captor and I. "We can negotiate, make a deal. You don't want this do you?." I knew him well enough to hear the nervous tremor in his voice. " I understand the Taliban, they don't give you much choice do they, but you have a choice. Let. her. go." The arm of Ramazan Ali had tightened round my throat as he thought about what the Boss man had said, it was easy to tell that the traitor had had one order, get me and unless Captain James had a shitting great plan this was it; curtains for me 'n' I hoped they'd make it quick. "Do you have family, we can protect them?"

_A gunshot had rang out at that minute, all of us dropping to the floor, the screams of the women behind me in the back of the truck and the confusion of 2 section ringing in the air, I still don't know to this day who fired it, if it had been an attempt to take out Ramazan but I'd gasped for breath as the corrupt ANA had choked me as we'd hit the ground, not letting his vice like hold go as he pulled me back up. The spits of his words had hit me on my face, my hands going up to his arms to try to get him to lessen his grip, let me get some air into my lungs, it was futile. "You." Ali had waved his gun around him, causing everyone to still then it was placed back against my temple, the metal pushing painfully into my skin. "You, you not care. Badrai he be here soon." My eyes were fixed on the Boss,

watching him; he'd spoken into his head piece, his words angry, brokering no doubt who was in charge as he tried to salvage something from our compromised position, worked out a way to stop someone with a gun and a suicide vest then he'd turned and looked at me, a brief glimpse of panic then something went still in his face as if he'd come to a decision - I hoped it involved putting on some superhero cape and saving me but in the end it was worse much worse. _

"_Leave her. Let her go and I'll take her place." Both of his hands went up to his helmet, removing it slowly, placing it on the ground with his rifle, then he took another few short calculated strides. "She's just a girl, it's me you want." The radio head set was next to go followed by fingerless gloved hands tearing the velcro of his flak jacket, noisy in the sudden silence as everyone kept a hold of their breath, then the protective material was discarded on the ground leaving him vulnerable, his eyes boring into the shit that had a hold of me. "My father has links to the government. I'm a valuable hostage." _

"_No." I'd shouted._

"_Molly listen to me." He spoke fast, aware that the Afghan didn't have the best understanding of the English language, the sound of a vehicle getting steadily close to us in the distance meaning that we were running out of time. "He's going to release you in 60 and you must leg it, none of your pishy girl shit okay and get your arse over to the lads." _

_To my shame tears were rolling down my face, so much for bravery in the face of adversity. "I don't want you toâ€¦|" _

"_Sshh" His finger went up to his mouth, his eyes still on Ramazan, this time his voice is lowered, our last conversation together. "This is for the best. Understand. I promise I'll come back to you." I'd let out a sob. "And when I do remind me to go on the fucking hostage negotiation course, okay?" And he'd smiled at me, his eyes soft, almost to the point of loving as he'd tried to reassure me. _

_I'd done as was told, followed instructions for once, my legs running to the safety of the lads, half way across I heard the sound of shouts in Pashto as a truck screeched to a halt, I'd hate myself for ever for running faster, away from the only man I'd ever loved, my only defense was in my nut he'd managed to get himself free, would be following me but by the time I got to safety, the lads forming a shield around me and turned, he'd gone and there was nothing I could do. _

"So would you?"

"Of course." Automatically I answer, then pause as I come back to reality, scratching the back of my neck as I try not to grit my teeth as the sound of laughter reaches me from the bar, taking a few deep breaths I try to think if I can remember any of his conversation; what I'd agreed to. But I can't. "Sorry mate. What?"

He sighs as he spins his glass around. "Go on a date with me?"

The pub smells of damp, clinging to the inside of my nose as I try to think of a way to let him down gently, to put him off the idea so that selfishly we can remain friends; he's watching me nervous. I

wonder if he knew how many lives I'd been responsible for ruining if he'd run out this pub screaming, never wanting to see me again. That would be the sensible choice. "I can't sorry."

"I'm not asking for commitment Molly, I know something's happened to you, saw your face during class but we get on together, please give me a chance. I like you."

Lifting the glass to my mouth I drain the liquid, putting it back down with a thud and standing, turning and getting my still soaked jacket. I don't care I need out of here. "I'd better get going."

Tony places his hand on my wrist, he's not rough but it has the effect that he wants because I look at him to tell him to let go, only to be met with a worried pair of blue eyes. "Molly, I'm sorry, please sit back down, I won't mention it again." As I'd sat down again he'd raised his hands to the surrender position. "I'm here if you ever need me." His hands stay still, not moving.. "I only want you to be happy."

And with that I stand, grabbing my jacket as I flee.

-og-

There's an eery silence in the flat when I let myself in, the central heatings making a noise but apart from that there's nothing, no telly or radio or even the sound of Libby's feet moving about as she makes us some tea. I'm glad I can't really be arsed with company just now and with relief I press my forehead against the closed front door until even that reminds me of him; his comforting gesture when I'd been upset at someone dying, his way of gettin' round the bloody rules that we weren't allowed to have any sort of relationship. For a perfect minute I'd been more important 'n' for someone that was, in the nicest way possible, a bit of a jobsworth it were unbelievable that he'd risk his career for someone like me. Funny ain't it that if we'd got caught, we'd have thought that would have been hell, the end of our careers and yet a few days later with some of that hindsight shit it would have been a godsend, he'd have been sitting somewhere with his son now, possibly reading him a bedtime story and I'd have been pondering what could have been from a flat in East Ham surrounded by a football squad of siblings. If only things could have been different.

Hanging my coat up on a nail that in a previous life held a picture I wonder if I should maybe go 'n' visit them; the parents. I could even get a hug from my mum, it's been ages since I've had that, it's just been a bit, let's say easier to keep away rather than seein' the pity in her eyes, or even worse when she gets all sad that she can't help me, tries to say the right thing 'n' all that 'cause nobody can.

I pause from my pity party for one 'n' culinary talents of piercing a hole in my microwave meal as I hear a noise I don't want to hear. Shit. Screwing my face up though there's no one to see it but yup with a regular thud there's the sound of a headboard hitting a wall. Jeez it's only 9.30pm and a week day. Maybe we've been burgled, and the burglars got a bit excited 'cause you hear about that don't you? Though there's something in my mind that wasn't right when i came in the flat now I come to think of it, not only the quiet but there was something visual and with the reassuring hum of the microwave as it

starts and a fork in my gob, I head back out to the hall and there lined up next to each other is a pair of huge manky trainers, and above that a hoodie. My flatmate is so gettin' it.

That's what I like about life, it's shit but something like this makes you smile, and I'm giggling, watching the numbers on the digital timer slowly descend as the crescendo from the bedroom gets louder, the thudding more frantic 'n' then silence. I do a round of applause, a silent whoop for my flatmate, I'm still grinning, happy that maybe just maybe my best friends life is starting to get on track.

The bedroom door opens as my meal finishes gettin' nuked which is perfect timing as it means I can keep my nut in the microwave, not have to look at whoever comes out her room, unless of course that she want's to introduce us and thenâ€¦

"This is my flatmateâ€¦"

â€¦. I'll turn smile, try to be mature 'n' not act as if I was a 16 year old and thinking it was the funniest thing ever that they was shagging, hold my hand out, actually scrap that after what they were doiâ€¦.

"Molly?" I freeze. Even my heart misses a beat or two, He's standing with his mouth wide open, he even looks confused. "Shit. Molly. How are you?"

"I'm fine." I've gone off my dinner, in fact the smell is making me want to be sick. What's that saying? Of all the welsh prannets in the world this one had to walk into my kitchen. Life really ain't fair.

"You know each other?"

"We served together in Afghan, didn't we Molls." I nod, leaning against the kitchen worktop for support; his explanation doesn't quite cover that this bloke standing in front of me with the wary blue eyes was once my best mate, one of only eight who knew what happened that day, was there to see that someone had given his life for me. Maybe we'd once had a thing round the back of an indian takeaway as well but we don't need to talk about that.

"So I don't need to introduce you then?" She's smart my flatmate.

"How've you been?"

"Fine." For the want of anything better to do than hug him 'n' tell him that I am actually pleased to see him, I give my attention back to my ready meal, peeling of the plastic and stirring it with the fork, asking casually. "You?"

"Alright, wasn't well for a bit but my mam's still got one son soâ€¦."

"That's a shame but you're fine now yeah?"

He nods his head, looking between Libby and I, correctly judging that I'm doing a good impression of someone who ain't interested. "It was

good seeing you Molls, you know where I am if you ever need me or us eh?"

Now would probably be the right answer, but as always there's something stopping me, watching him as he walks out the kitchen as if he's defeated, no hint of the cocky swagger that he used to have. As I'm about to let go of the breath I've been holding, his body comes to a stop, then he turns towards me, he looks shiftily at me or I look shiftily at him, it's a close call. "I don't understand why you cut us all off Molls, we were your mates. It can't be guilt or that 'cause you knowâ€¦ you put your life in danger to save me, you didn't think that if you'd been shot, died that day, that I'd have to live the rest of my life feelin' the guilt. All he did was the same. You might of had something going on but even then it wouldn't haveâ€¦|...,"

"Weâ€¦|...didn'tâ€¦|.." I can't get the words out, struggling with the panic that's going on inside. No one can ever know.

"I saw you in the bunker, he wanted you to be." Smurf interrupts, his forehead crumpling as if he's got some kind of pain. "Well you know, he wanted you to be the last person he saw." There's an awkward pause then he turns towards Libby, smiles sadly at her as if he's resigned, taking a few steps backwards. "You know where I am if you need me, I'm guessingâ€¦|..." He shrugs, leaving the sentence unfinished then turns and walks out the door, there's silence in the room, both of us giving him time to get his shoes on, waiting for the sound of a closing door 'n' then I breath, deeply as I try to sort it all out in my nut.

Libby claps her hands, jolting me out of my thoughts. "Well that went well." She's grinning at me, as I try to look apologetic.

"Shit sorry."

"Could have been worse. You could have slept with him or something." I honestly try to arrange my face into one of innocence, her face falls; "Shit she has." There it is again a line from the past, it's as if the walls are coming in that little bit closer, tightening around me 'n' there's nothing I can do. Libby's pulling a face, two fingers going into her mouth before she shakes her whole body as if she's trying to get rid of something. "You are telling me, that we've shagged the same bloke. Ewwwww, that ain't right. That is not right at all."

"Yeah well." Opening the fridge I take out wine unscrewing the top and then drinking straight from the bottle, swigging it down, until I can't take anymore, my head fuzzy. The news that I could have lost him too, that I wasn't about to help him, it'sâ€¦| well another failing but like with the Bossman, I have a lot of faults but self pity ain't one of them. I hold out the bottle, challenging my normally hygienically anal flatmate. "We've shared blokes, surely we can share a wine bottle, right?."

Libby wipes the top, Rome weren't built in a day I suppose, taking one long sip before theatrically pointing the bottle in my direction. "He nearly died, had a brain haemorrhage, not that I feel sorry for him I'm not that kind of person but, he's the first guy I've liked in well, a very long time and I think somewhere in that messed up brain of yours you care about him too, so if you're quick enough you could

always catch him."

I reach back taking the bottle out of her hand, another sip and then I'm decided, I'm maybe not ready to move on, probably never will but it's maybe time I start accepting the past. She follows me out to the hall as I try to get my wet trainers back on. "And don't think sister that getting me pissed is going to get you out of telling me what that shit about that last person he saw was."

My jacket stays on the nail as I turn, I don't have any time to get it but I smile at my flatmate. "When I come back, I promise I'll tell you everything."

The rain hasn't eased, my feet pounding through puddles as I take steps towards my past. Thankfully the streets are quiet at this time of night so it's easy to spot him as he walks down the street. "SMURF" His head is down, cars whooshing past me; drowning out my shouts. "SMURF." I'm out of breath as I eventually catch up with him, placing my hand on his shoulder, his face surprised as he turns. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Then he's hugging me, the way best mates do.

5. If Only

"We need to Medevac him out Sir." There's the heavy rumbling sound of tanks around me as the guy lying in the mud with half a leg groans, his hand grabbing onto my flack jacket. "Hang in there mate." I squeeze his hand reassuringly "Sir, you need to send a 9 liner." Taking my pen out I write on the damp cheek of my injured casualty, trying to shield him from the rain with my body as I wait for a reply, the line crackling in my ear as the Commanding Officer starts to speak.

"What's his injuries Private Dawes?"

"Sir." For fuck sake as if I'm gonna' say in front a bloke who's life has been kiboshed with one explosive device that he's missing a bleedin' leg, like how the fuck to guarantee that someone goes into shock. "I'm asking for a 9 liner 'cause he's an urgent surgical medevac, we NEED to get him out of here." I repeat, keeping my head down as there's the sudden crack of gunfire, I smile, removing all traces of unease I feel at the wet around the ears rupert who I'm reporting to. My heart is thumping in my chest, the noise of the live firing hurting my ears.

"Roger that, await further instructions Private." Jesus Christ what's the use of an exercise if you're gonna' fuck it up.

"Straight out of Sandhurst?"

"Sorry, did I roll my eyes out loud?" I ask as I look down, trying not to laugh. There's no other casualties at the minute and if this was real life this guy would need me with him so I sit, the cold of the ground seeping through my combats. "Yeah, think he's panicking a bit, first time in charge 'n' probably hoping to impress the big brass. Feel sorry for him in a way." Using the time I have I start to tidy up my Bergen, keeping the conversation going. "What happened to you?"

"IED Herrick" He puts his hands behind his head, letting out a sigh as he relaxes, a cheeky grin lighting up his muddy face. "Now trying to make it as an actor. What's your background?"

"Yeah did Afghan, seen a bit out there."

"Once seen Afghan, never forget Afghan."

"Too bleedin' right there, sayin' that could have all been a bit different what with that new crap they've got." I've got a bergen full of the stuff, Xstat. Plugs a gunshot wound in less than 20 seconds 'n' stops a major bleed out. Don't think I'm the only one to be a bit pissed that it took so long to get it regulated, like if you had a choice between dying or losing a leg would you not be happy to be a bit of guinea pig, I know I would. Saying that I'll be more impressed when they find out a way of microchipping us so you can't lose someone, just start up a computer and bob's your uncle you know where they are. Maybe I'm gonna' have to get used to life being one big if only.

His shoulders shrug as if he's resigned, "No point stressing about the past is there? What's for you 'n' all that. Anyway, I've been picked for the Invictus Games, met Prince Harry, life's just different. Could off lost a leg to cancer or something. This shit goes down great at the pub, I've never bought a pint in months."

"Bleedin' tight arse." I laugh, listening out for the sound of the incoming Chinook. "And you'll be up for an Oscar."

"Exactly." His hand comes up to mine. "I'm Dave."

"Nice to meet you Dave."

"Everything under control Dawes." My Sergeant appears by my side, his eyes flicking over the comedian in front of me who goes back to practicing his acting. "Yeah requested a 9 liner 'n' hopefully help'll be on it's way soon. Got the bleeding to stop for the moment. He's stabilised"

"Second Lieutenant's shitting himself. He's got the OC in with himâ€¦." His breathing's heavy as if he rushed to get here, "...listening to every word, it were fun for a bit but there's only so long you can watch someone making an arse of themselves." We all stop, listening to further instructions coming in. I grab my gun that was sitting next to me, starting to put my Bergen on my back, hopeful that I'm gonna' get asked to go to the soldier that's just reported that he's been shot. "Right Dawes, your up." I smile gratefully, I'd forgotten how much I loved this. "Stewart, Harris. I need cover for Dawes. Go do your stuff. I'll wait with this one."

When I get there, the injured guy is lying quiet. The exercise is organised to make sure that we're gonna' get as close to a real life battle scene as possible 'n' I'm waiting for there to be a gunshot wound, like what's been reported in but this guy's remaining quiet, not tellin' me anything. Old habits die hard as I put my fingers to the side of his windpipe. "Can you tell me where it hurts mate?" I do the tried and tested shake before running my hands over his body, trying to feel for anything obvious and it's then that I feel the warm sticky mess on the back of his flak jacket. I'm reaching for my

Bergen, taking the bandages out, ready to apply pressure, if this was a year ago, it would be easy but I've got this new wonder stuff 'n' I'm gonna' look an absolute tit if I use it when I shouldn't. Shit I can't remember. I'm rolling him towards me, talking to him, tellin' him that he's gonna' be okay and looking for assistance from my section. The wounds not real obviously but it's enough to have the adrenalin kick in, my hands shaking. "I'm gonna' roll you, get this wound sorted, then we'll get you out of here, alright." As the lads get into position, I start the drill, pressing the button on my radio, issuing the request to my CO who this time seems to be more inclined to get the ball rolling and then I go back to this wound. I try to think back to our days training, remember what was said, Libby sitting next to me; her voice whispering as we tuned out of what the lecturer was saying, too impatient to find out about this stuff. "Oh here we go, it is NOT, they've put that in capitals." She'd clarified, looking up for a minute to make sure I was paying attention. I'm now not sure that I was. Then I remember her words. "Indicated for use in: the thorax; the pleural cavity; the mediastinum; the abdomen; the retroperitoneal space; the sacral space above the inguinal ligament; or tissues above the clavicle. Basically the whole body."

"Sir, I can't use the Xstat, there ain't no exit wound so I don't know where the damage is inside. The casualty's unconscious Sir and I'm not sure how much blood he's lost. I'm gonna' try and stop the bleedin' but.." The roar of the helicopter above me means that I can't talk anymore, shutting up and getting back to my job. When the Chinook lands, the MERT team coming out I get a pang again about being in the wrong place that if things had been different I would have been one of them, instead of trying to live in the shadows, not be noticed in case they wanted to send me back to Afghan. I couldn't return, too much of a coward, leaving the first time without him, had been the hardest thing I've ever done 'n' I know I'm like a broken record but it weren't 'cause of any romantic shit, it was that he was a good person and he didn't deserve that to happen to him.

I would have loved to have gone out there though, with like a search party like what you see on the news, rows of us in close formation, scouring Afghanistan until we found him. If I'm honest I don't think they've tried hard enough, George keeps telling me that they're doing all that they can, that there's loads of stuff that goes on in the background that we don't know about but what worries me the most is that he ain't got anything to do with the government, unlike what his son said and if Badrai 'n' that found out he'd lied, well I can't think about that.

Over the noise of the blades I give my report, only nodding as the Major gives me a calculating look as I admit that I ain't used the stuff. "We'll have a debriefing after and find out if you're right."

"Yes Sir."

It's almost dusk when wearily we all stop, groaning with relief when the klaxon sounds, the vast area stilling signalling that the exercise is over. We stop waiting to regroup before heading back across the Plains. I'm smiling as the Sarge walks over to me, taking his helmet off as he does. "Glad that's over then Dawes?"

"Desperate for a shower Sarge." Grinning back at me he wipes his hand

across his face that like all of us is splattered with mud, our lips dry and cracked. Mine ache as I take a drink of water, letting it spill out of my mouth to try and get some hydration. "'n' maybe even a take away 'n' a glass of wine. Not much." I finish.

He sighs, looking up at the heavy sky. "Simple pleasures."

"Yeah they're the best. Did we do alright?" There's always a sense of pride with these things, we all feel it, a chance in a more peaceful world to show that we've all still got it.

"I think it went well, though I'm sure the CO's going to be in for a bit of a roasting. Few dodgy decisions in my opinion. Anyway, the OC has asked to speak to you"

"Shit, didn't use the bleedin' Xstat, bet you I bloody should have."

He shrugs as if he's not too fussed. "One thing, you make a mistake like that and you'll know for the next time. This is the place to make the mistakes."

"Spouse, but could do without a bollocking."

He giggles, it's one of the things we take the piss out of him for, the sound never sounds right coming out of the hardened soldier, there ain't much else for us to say about him; he's a good bloke. "Just think of the glass of wine later. You'll get him in the tent." He finishes before heading off.

In the end he's not in the tent, instead standing relaxed against a defender as he checks his phone, lucky for some is all I can say I ain't seen mine for days, saying that at least I don't get the hourly update on Smurf and Libby's shagging relationship. There is a thing as too much knowledge. "Sir?"

"At ease Dawes. You alright?" I relax my shoulders, watching the normally man of few words as he looks at me, then puts his phone in his pocket as he straightens up. He smiles as if he's concerned.

"Shittin' myself that I made the wrong call with the Xstat Sir."

"No Dawes, you were impressive out there." Well that seals it, there ain't no way this is gonna' be good. I'm thinking possibly Sierra Leone, I know with what happened that they've not felt that I could be deployed but obviously my times up and they've decided that I'm fully operational again or some shit like that. "Have you heard?" Nodding his head, acknowledging the confused shaking of mine he continues to watch me, it's unsettling. "There's been a development. Your Captain in Afghanistan. And I hoped you hadn't heard it from anyone else, you know what these things are like, always get leaked before they become official."

The air seems to still, panic starting. The kind that travels up your spine robbing you of the air out of your lungs and rushing it up into your ears. I want to cry, if it's bad news I'm not ready, I can't be told in the middle of a field like this, without anybody to pick up the pieces because if it's the worst I need my mum. The pause is becoming too long, my brain too scrambled to be able to work out what

emotions are displayed on his face. "Sir?" My voice breaks as I beg him to put me out of my misery, over two years I've waited for something, anything but I'm so scared that after this moment I'm not gonna' have any hope left.

It's as if everything is now in slow motion, his movement as he looks away, his eyes focusing on something in the distance before he looks back at me and smiles. "He's coming home Dawes, he's been released."

Sorry you may of had to use just a huge amount of creative license for this. Google and I are now best friends though with any (probably all) inaccuracies I'll blame the search engine. The Xstat is real but I ain't got a clue when it's going to be licensed or if it even has. This is the last daily update, though thought it was a good place to leave it ;) Got a day of travelling tomorrow and back to the real world but do still have a couple of chapters safely tucked away. Thanks again for reading x

6. Breathing The Same Air

**I promise ff technical issues aside I will update tomorrow! I'm trying not to rush this story so I'm sorry if it's taking a bit long, I'm as desperate to get CJ back as I hope you all are too but trying to explore Molly's feelings. Anyway I'll shut up and let you read - thank you :) **

There's a tiny gap between two houses and you can just see the sea, not in the dark as it is now with the street lights polluting the view; but during the day you can. I think it's 'cause of what I always think, you know, of me 'n' him standing on a beach somewhere 'n' everything's alright that's making me stand here with the phone in my hand; shaking. It's been nearly 4 weeks of waiting, a different kind to before but still waiting, scared to put my phone down or thinking that if I've left it to make a cup of tea that when I come back there'll be something; there never was but there is now. I'm shittin' myself.

I turn at the creaking of the door to see Libby peeking round as if she's not sure if I am actually in here, she switches the light on and I have trouble focussing at first, blinking as I try to get used to it, I don't know how long I've stood here, scrap that I do I just need to look at the message 'n' that'll tell me.

"You alright?" Her face falls which makes me even worse. "Crap your not." I must look a mess, I've never been a pretty crier. "I'll get Smurf."

Outside I can hear the fragments of the conversation, can picture Smurf being shoved into the room, it makes me start to laugh but then my nose starts to run so I stop. "Molls?" To give him his due he comes over and hugs me, like he used to do before it went to shit between us, patting my back as if I was a kid. "What's happened?"

I press my face into his chest, my hands gripping onto his shirt as I ask the question I'm most frightened of. "What if he hates me Smurf?"

"Shhh, of course he won't." We stand like that for minutes, his

heartbeat reassuring until he pulls away, probably 'cause I've soaked his t-shirt with my tears. Taking my phone out my hands he reads it; the text, then he tugs my hand, guiding me until we're sitting on the edge of the bed and his arm goes around me again, gently pressuring me until I'm resting my head against his chest, sighing as I start sobbing again.

Six weeks Smurf's been back in my life and surprisingly I'm not sure what I'd have done without him. He'd sat up with me for hours watching the rolling stream of the news, both of us uncomfortable watching the man that was once our respected Commanding Officer keeping his head down away from the endless bursts of flashes from cameras. I'd never realised what an intrusion of privacy all that shit was, knowing that he'd hate it all; wanting to get back to his family without this side of it all. Asking myself why should he have to go through it, he'd done nothing wrong, one bad judgement at thinking my life was more important than his 'n' that was it.

We've even been in agreement that if I had voted for the Prime Minister in the first place, I wouldn't vote for him ever again, the sanctimonious shit having sounded as if he'd been responsible for going in there 'n' having personally taken the Bossman out of hell, rather than a few conversations from the comfort of Downing Street agreeing that they would return a couple of Guantanamo Bay prisoners which in my opinion they should have done 2 years 'n' 3 fucking months ago.

Smurf sighs into my hair. "It's always been you. He'd never have let anyone else have you." The bed creaks as I pull myself away, dragging a pillow down to use it for comfort as I cross my legs underneath me, watching him through my watery eyes as he stares ahead, a slight blush working its way up his neck. "Didn't want to admit it to myself." I smile sadly as he looks at me shiftily as if he's not comfortable talking about the past. "I was so infatuated with you, 'cause that's what it was when I look back, just infatuation 'cause you saved my life." His shoulders shrug "You were never mine, were never meant to be mine."

"Sorry."

"Don't be daft." His face twists, but it's an amused smile he gives me. "It's all worked out ain't it. You were right what you said in the bunker. Though I think it might have been me who would have killed you before we got on that plane to Afghan."

"We'll have to agree to disagree on that." I laugh, but even though it is genuine it still sounds strange as if it doesn't have a place within the gentle sounds of the flat. Bumping my shoulder into him, we share a smile before I settle back against him, the rumble of his voice starting again.

"As soon as I heard you talk that day, watched you togetherâ€¦" He continues as if he's talking to himself as he recalls it all. "It all made sense. I'd remember the looks between you both, you used to have this special smileâ€¦..."

"Piss off." I can feel his chuckle reverberating through my cheek, his hand is pulling at my elbow. There's something oddly comforting about it, knowing that he's happy with my flatmate and that we can be what we were always meant to be; best mates.

"No you did, like you were happy with the world." I can hear the grin in his words, as if it pleased him "And he did too, he was always more relaxed, often I'd see him watching you but he never seemed fazed when he realised I'd caught him, he'd just smile at me, ask if I was alright then walk away or tell me to do something, just put it down to coincidence didn't I, that I'd caught him making sure you weren't up to any trouble." He pauses, both of us listening to the sound of a car alarm going off outside, then he takes a deep breath before continuing. "Brains once said that the Boss always asked your opinion, even if we'd suggested something he'd still want to ask you. We put it down to you having impressed him, that he respected you but it was more than that. Think we were all blind; accepting 'cause it shouldn't of happened, especially not with him being such a stickler for the rules." He shook his head. "Who'd have thought."

"The rest don't know do they? They didn't guess did they?" I'm panicking, as far as I know his parents don't even know that there was anything going on, a sense of empathy for the girl who couldn't move on 'cause there son had been a hero but that was it.

"Nah don't think so." Smurf reassures me, the feel of a shoulder shrugging next to my ear. "If they did they never said."

"Nothing actually happened you know that don't you?"

"I believe you Molls, but you loved him, the Bossman, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"And he loved you. You don't tell someone that you want them to be the last person they see before they cop it if you're not in love with them. And they always say that love is strong don't they?"

"Dunno, never been in love before." We still, both contemplating, me what it's like to be in love, thinking about the boss, memories from before, my brain a jumble; Smurf probably wondering when he'll next get a shag. "What do you think has happened to him out there?" I've always been scared to think about it, my voice a whisper as I ask.

"Well it wouldn't have been pretty but he's survived two years Molls. They always say it's the not knowing that's the worst don't they? That you have no control over your life, living everyday wondering if it'll be your last. He'll have needed time toâ€¦.. well as he would say acclimatise."

The breath that I release is shuddery as I try to hold onto my tearful panic. "I thoughtâ€¦. Well I thought that if we were to meet that he'd want to see me by myself, not in a crowd full of other people. I dunno' it's like he doesn't want to see me but he feels he should."

"How the fuck do you get that from a text message from his mum, inviting you to theirs for a party." He asks incredulously.

"I dunno', but I'm right ain't I?"

"Molls" Smurf pulls away, taking my hand instead, holding it in his as he thinks about something, when he focusses on me his jaw is set, a decisive glint to his eyes. "I can't tell you what he's thinking, why he wants to meet like that, maybe he's scared of his feelings after all this time, not ready or I dunno' you could be right but you need to be the brave girl that I know you are." His fingers tip up my jaw until I'm looking into his reassuring blue eyes. "Keep your chin up and be the strong one alright? Let him see that you're there for him if he needs you. Can you do that for me? Because he's not asked any of us so you're the only representative of his section, thank fuck the only one who he loved in that kind of way, though I was defo his favourite what with me being the best recruit at Catterick 'n' all that."

"Piss off." I'm hiccuping, brought on by a combination of laughter and my still falling tears. "But I will I promise." He hands me a tissue from somewhere in his pocket, one that I ain't sure is necessarily clean but needs must, blowing my nose loudly. "Smurf?"

"Yeah."

"What should I wear?"

It's starts as a chuckle, his face expressive in his confusion of thinking of something funny to say and before I know it I'm laughing like I've never laughed in years, him joining me until Libby's knocking on the door, looking at us as if she's confused or that I've finally gone mad. Standing up Smurf punches me gently in the arm. "I ain't got a fucking clue Dawesy but I know someone who might. Libs you're up. I'm away to watch the footie."

"Smurf"

"Yeah." Just about to leave the room he turns, his fingers tapping on the wooden frame.

"Thanks for coming back into my life."

He thinks for a minute then nods once. "I never left it Molls, it were just geography or some shit like that."

7. Hello Again

My eyes are on my feet as I walk out of the coolness of the old house, I've got too much adrenalin to look up, my stomach churning that after 2 years and 3 months I'm gonna' finally lay eyes on him again. There's been everything going through my nut; from him not even speaking to me to us picking up where we left off. I don't mind any, even the bad ones aren't as scary anymore as long as I see for myself that he's alright. Pausing at the top of the stone steps, I take a final deep breath, lifting my head to take in the scene before me though really I'm just searching the garden in front of me for a tall bloke with curly hair.

Rebecca sees me first, raising her hand, I make my way down feeling like I'm being watched then I see George raising the bottle of champagne in his hand as an acknowledgment, my smile nervous in it's response. "I think he's done a runner." She whispers as soon as I

reach her, handing me a glass, it's cold in my hand as I take a nervous sip, still looking around me as if it's a game of who can find him first. "Judy's asked me 5 times if I've seen him. As I told her." Rebecca leans closer to me. "I'm only his ex-wife, we weren't exactly communicating brilliantly before he headed off. There's more chance of him coming out from his hiding place for Sam but he's refusing to budge from the x-box, like his father he's decided to be shy."

We both move back to let another guest past, Rebecca whispering to me that he's a cousin twice removed and that Judy's not even sure how he managed to grab an invite, I already feel sorry for the Boss, like he's some sort of circus act. "How is he?"

"Charles?" She sighs as I nod my head, her face crumpling. "Not the same, he doesn't smile, it's as if someone's turned off his sense of humour." Her eyes widen as she looks at me. "Please don't think I expected him to come back and pretend that nothing's happened but well, it's hard for Sam. He's waited all this time and Charles is trying I know he is but I wonder if we'll ever get the real man back. It's all just a mess."

A mess that's all my fault. "Sorry."

"Oh Molly." I turn to see Judy descending towards me, a brightness in her eyes now that wasn't there before as if she's finally had a decent night's sleep, welcoming the hug she gives me. "I'm sorry, he must be having a bad day, god knows where he is." She pulls away, holding onto my shoulders as she looks me square in the eye. "I'm sorry. All I can suggest is that you pop round another day or that maybe he gives you a call?" The final suggestion is asked with a questioning tone as if she's not sure herself it that's a possibility, looking around her, hopeful that he's gonna' appear before looking back at me, apologising for her part in this. "I thought this would be a good idea, an informal way of seeing everyone again but possibly not. I think it's all too much".

Patting her on the arm I try and reassure her. "It's alright honest, I understand."

"It is wonderful to see you and well you look beautiful Molly." She looks me up and down, a wave of embarrassment rolls over me, that I've gone to such an effort, the pretty dress that I felt good in when I tried it on, now uncomfortable, almost claustrophobic. "Please stay for awhile." Not wanting to upset her I nod, but I need to be alone, making my excuses and moving from them; taking myself away so that I can deal with my disappointment.

When he'd first told me that the house was magical at Christmas I'd imagined a big tree 'n' some over the top decorations but I can see what he means now if it's as lovely as this for a summer gathering. The garden's been decorated with thousands of tiny fairy lights; covering trees and bordering old walls, it's like something out a film, helped by the soft violin music floating down the garden, following me as I wander about. Taking my shoes off I carry them, letting my toes dig into the soft grass, needing to feel something other than the pain in my heart. I'm looking for somewhere I can be by myself, where I don't have to look up and occasionally smile at some stranger. I'm about to return to the house when I spot an old wooden swing, tucked away in the corner of the garden, hung up on the

branch of an impressive tree and sit down. I smile to myself as it creaks thinking of a young Boss man sitting here; looping my fingers round the old cord rope, keeping a hold of my champagne flute in one hand and my shoes in the other as I tilt my head back, pushing with my feet until I'm gently swaying. It feels good as if for a minute I can let go; that it's keeping my tears away as the gentle motion soothes me as if I was a five year old kid.

"Hello" I spill some of my drink as I sit up, searching around me for the voice that I recognise; that I've not heard for over 2 years, eventually I find him, leaning against the thick trunk of the tree, he could have been there all the time, camouflaged in the shade. His hands are in his pockets, his legs crossed at his ankles as if he's relaxed but everything about him is tense, the muscles in his neck taught. "Have you been alright?" The sound of his voice is beautiful, a melodic tilt to it that I've never been able to replicate in my nut.

"Yes thanks." I croak, my throat treacherously tight. Tucking my feet under me I stay where I am, balancing, hairs rising on the back of my neck, my heart pounding in my chest. I want to ask him how he is, tell him how sorry I am but there's something about him that makes me think he wouldn't want to hear that so I keep quiet, biding my time.

He kicks an old root, his mouth moving as if he's going to say something but no words come out. I wonder if I'd walk past him in the street, he's changed, older; last week's six o'clock shadow on his face as if he doesn't want to be him or is trying to persuade people that he's not the same man that went away. "You want a drink?" Nervously I hold my glass out towards him, the humourless laugh that he gives hurting me somewhere in my gut.

'You're alright. If I started I don't think I'd ever stop. I've been advised to stay off it.'

"Yeah I got that advice too. Piece of shit." I knock it back, then look at the empty glass as if it was gonna' refill itself.

"Mum said that you've stayed in."

I'm ashamed as I look across the lawn, watching as room by room the grand house is illuminated. "Couldn't imagine doin' anything else." I answer softly.

"You were a good soldier Molly." Past tense. He's right though, I study my glass, the few remaining drops of champagne sticking to the side, not budging, a bit like my career. His sigh makes me look up at him again, his hand tugging on the back of his neck where his curls used to be. "Did they make you go to a shrink?"

"Yup, poor bloke. Said his life would never be the same again. Don't think I have a good affect on people in my life. Saying that once managed to get 5 Abba songs into one of my sessions. I was well pleased with myself." I say proudly, giggling to myself at the memory.

"Did he realise?" The shutters that are in his eyes are lifted, for a second, a warmth coming back into them before it's gone, replaced by a wariness.

I start the gentle motion of the swing again, needing something to do so that I don't stare, make him feel uncomfortable. "He said 'the day before you came' I felt I was good at my job. 'The Name of the game' is that there is no game and he weren't trying to trick me and the sessions were built on trust and 'when all is said is done' he was just trying to do his job 'n' he'd be grateful if I let him. We bonded a bit after that, became easier 'n' in the end it helped, really he just listened but it's good to have someone to talk to, that ain't gonna' judge or tell you that time'll help.

"What does help?"

"For me, you coming back. Knowing that your gonna' see your son grow up, be part of your family's life."

"That's very noble of you." His tone is bordering on arrogant, his face tightening into a look of disbelief.

I don't elaborate, don't tell him that I'd do anything to atone for the last few years, congratulate him if he'd told me that he was gonna' give it a bash with Rebecca again or trawled through dating sites with him to find whoever he thought was perfect; anything as long as he was home, safe. "It's the truth. I'm sorry" I mutter.

His eyebrows are raised as if he's apologising, his hand picking at the bark on the tree, there's minutes of silence before he turns and looks at me again. "All I wanted was to come home, to seeâ€¦." The sentence is left unfinished, he sighs looking up at the tree, exhaling a breath, his tall frame folds until he's sitting on the ground. Dusk is starting to draw in, the illumination from the white twinkling lights highlighting the hollow in his cheeks, defining the dark circles under his eyes; he looks like shit. "How are the lads?"

"Had kinda' lost touch."

"Why?"

I stand up and walk a few steps, my footsteps silent without my shoes, there's a look of fear as I get too close, so copying him I sit on the grass. "Loads of reasons why, I won't bore you."

"Do."

We stare at each other, he gives in first looking down at the grass, tugging the short blades with his long fingers, the sound of the party still going on behind us. I wonder how long it'll be before someone finds us, our conversation uncomfortable but I don't want it to end, want it just to be him and I. "At first." His head snaps up towards me as he listens but I'm still struggling to find the words, I'd never admitted to myself never mind anyone else why I'd shut them out. "I struggled to get through every day, I didn't want anyone around me. They only tried to help and they couldn't. It was the only way I knew how to cope."

"I understand. I feel the same." The sound of laughter reaches us, I watch him, his head turning towards the sound, like a child hearing a new noise, his expression a carefully controlled mask. I look too,

watching as a couple dance, the previous orchestral music replaced by a latest chart song, words sung about secret loves, alone I'm sure in thinking that the words could sum up my feelings about us. "Do you ever need people again?" He asks uncertainly, the hint of emotion back in his voice. Looking at him again, taking the opportunity whilst his focus is fixed elsewhere, watching as the lights create shadows of wistfulness on his still proud face then I look away, scared that he'll catch me. Along with him I keep watching the dancers, there's something hypnotic about their movements; as if there bodies need to be close, their movements away from each other taxing followed by the fluidity of their bodies as they come together again; the relief that they're back in each other's arms.

"Yeah, people creep in, become important but they can't replaceâ€¦|..". This time it's me that leaves the sentence unfinished, I can feel the tears building as I think of how lonely I've felt, at how he probably feels the same way 'n' I can't do anything to help him. He's watching me, his eyes narrowing as he contemplates what I say, I smile at him; trying to reassure, receiving a half smile that's a facial muscle moving 'n' nothing else in return then it folds into a passive expression.

He sighs after a beat. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologise, you need to find your own way." I try to get up as graceful as possible with a glass and a pair of shoes in my hands, knowing that I've out stayed my welcome. The manners that have been instilled in him since he was a child meaning that he follows my lead and then we stand together, neither knowing what to say to each other. Eventually it's him, one hand coming out of his pocket, scratching his chin.

"Well it was good seeing you Molly."

"Yeah, you too Sir." I start to walk away, the grass suddenly cold under my feet when I realise that this could be the last time I ever see him, turning ready to raise my voice I stop, the words unspoken. He's standing, almost serene, watching me. We stay staring at each other, for seconds, minutes or hours I'm not sure before there's something that flickers behind his eyes and I remember. With three paces I'm in front of him, my hands grasping his hollowed cheeks and pulling his face down towards me until our foreheads are touching, for a minute I think he's gonna' pull away and then it's as if the fight goes out of his body, his head pressing against mine as I whisper. "If you ever need anything 'n' I mean anything then I'll do anything, 'cause I am so so sorry." My voice breaks but I don't care; he's here.

Too soon he pulls away, the moment ending, dull dark eyes looking down at me, nothing in them for me to read as he starts walking backwards. "There's nothing for you to be sorry about. I'd do it again."

"I wouldn't let you." The words are blurted out before I've even thought about them but it's the truth.

Finally there's the exhaled short laugh that I know, his tongue in the side of his mouth as he shakes his head then he smiles at me, like he used to do when he couldn't work me out, his eyes going to his feet and then when he looks back up he's sad, his head tilted to

the side. "Can I ask you something?" I nod, waiting until he's worked whatever it is that's going on in his nut. "Would you understand ifâ€¦.wellâ€¦ if I said that all that was important to me was that you were okay, that I knew that somewhere in this fucked up world you were somewhere, happyâ€¦. for the moment." The furrow on his brow, the one that I want to wipe away deepens, another step taken away from me. "That's what I want you to do for me."

"Yeah...butâ€¦.."

"Dad."

He doesn't answer Sam, still watching me as if giving me time to say something but I don't; shutting up and looking at the ground, only lifting my gaze when I hear the words, smiling as I see the obvious bond that Rebecca maybe can't 'cause she's too close to them both. "Hello scamp"

Charles' shirt sleeve is tugged, his son trying to get him to move in the direction of the house. "I couldn't find you, and I overheard mum saying that you had buggered off somewhere and I've just got to this level andâ€¦. Hello Molly." Sam's wide brown eyes are turned towards me, his face breaking into an even bigger grin. "You could come too and see, because this boss level is awesome and Dad is it true that you had a paddling pool and you wouldn't share it and you once asked Molly if she was the Queen."

I can feel the heat travelling up my face waiting for a row or something but he doesn't, smiling at Sam before looking at me; a hint of apology. "Sorry Molly, I'm going to have to go."

"No worries."

He hasn't left though, as if he's remembered something, turning and giving Sam a look as if to say 'give me a minute', a questioning raise of his eyebrow towards me. "You were going to say something?"

Swallowing nervously, clearing my throat I say what I want to say, "Just come back to me Boss, that was all." Both eyebrows shoot up with surprise, his head almost recoiling with shock 'n' I think I've blown it, rubbing the back of my head with my free hand, trying to do some damage limitation, a long uncomfortable pause where I can't bear to look at him. "If you want that is, 'n' when your ready, ifâ€¦..."

"Dad says he'll try."

Charles is crouched down next to Sam, still holding his son's hand as he looks at me - scrutinising my reaction, I grin, a huge big grin, relief lifting me 'cause really I can't ask anymore than that, his face softens, it's as if his eyes are shedding some of the stress. "Tell your dad thanks Sam." And with that I turn, for the first time in years I think I might sleep alright tonight.

**I'd like to thank the wonderful Jen for suggesting the inclusion of Sam when I was struggling with the wording of finishing the chapter with a glimpse of hope - love the supportive OG ff community - thank you! Also I'd like to take this opportunity to apologise on behalf of

my employers for not giving me a long enough lunch break to upload this earlier, they have really no consideration towards my playing with words :) **

Hope it's okay. x

8. People Help the People

There's a humidity in the air now, sunshine filling the days 'n' making everything just that little bit more shiny it's not that it's just 'cause summer's arrived it's almost as if the world was waiting for him to come back. Even the seagulls don't sound so angry as I pound my way along the promenade, as if they've toned down their fury, maybe 'cause there's more fish in the sea or something 'n' Harold seems to come back with an extra sway to his walk, greeting me with a more cheerful miaow and I'm not even gonna' mention Smurf and Libby - you really don't want me to go there, let's just say that the lighter nights have given them even more stamina. And for me there's hope; a glimmer but it's there.

My life hasn't gone back to how it was before, don't think it ever will. When I look back I realise how easy I had it, even with my shitty upbringing; how everything had seemed uncomplicated before I was deployed but it ain't as bad as it was, when I wake now I have a minute of panic then I remember that he's back where he should be and you've gotta be grateful for small things right? I sleep better at night now too, still dream but they're not horrific; a little bit confusing at times loads of images shoved together but it's like my brains sifting through them sorting them out for me while I do the manual shit like running at 6am in the morning, my eyes flicking towards the sunrise; waiting until the sun's high in the sky before looking out to see - some things you just can't change.

I'm not the only one in the morning anymore either, adding to a feeling that I'm not in life alone now. Tourists or god knows who sitting on the benches rather than tucked up in their houses, coming out and taking in the view, drinking coffee and I even smile, not saying hello 'cause chances are I'll shout at them, the music in my ears distorting my ability to speak at a normal level but I'm engaging more, happy for life to be going on around me but still waiting, checking my phone every 5 minutes and at the end of each day feeling a bit sad that he ain't been in touch but that's selfish I know that.

There's things that remind me of the past, it would be hard for there not to be when for nearly 6 glorious months you were tuned to one person, consciously and unconsciously watching them for every single little detail; like the bloke that's sitting there with a silver thermos cup, like what the boss used to have, having a giggle to myself at the memories of how we used to bounce off each other with our humour until I realise that I'm being rude, he's staring at me, giving the bloke an apologetic smile as I run past hiâ€|. I'm taking my headphones out as I come to a stop. "Sir?"

"Thought you were just going to run past me."

"Well no disrespect, but what with that" My fingers hover around my face "shit going on, you don't exactly look like yourself." Way to go Dawesy, but he laughs, tilting his head whilst he thinks of what I've

said or what response he's gonna' make.

"You telling me that I don't look good with a beard?" Is his chosen reply as he scrunches his eyes against the slowly building light.

I shrug, a grin on my face as I take a sip of my water, thinking, there's a playfulness to his eyes that's warming; encouraging me to keep this going, a hint of him, so I grin, toying with the question for a minute longer then I sit down next to him looking down towards the sea, shrugging my shoulders as I find that I can't think of anything witty. "You don't look like you, if you know what I mean." He nods as if he's fine with that answer, going back to stare straight ahead at the sunrise, he obviously doesn't have the same fear that I have, that in someway it jinxed the mission that fateful day.

We fall into a comfortable silence, like he's happy just being here in Clacton-on-Sea, always got to be a first I suppose. "What you doin' here?" My words are soft and slow, eventually interrupting the stillness.

"On this bench?"

"Clacton. Did you come to see me?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." He must see the confusion on my face at my answer, he moves slightly, his shoulders creating more space between us. "I don't know, it seemed like a good idea."

"It's good to see you." I don't get an answer as he takes a drink, his eyes following another joggers path along the sea front, whether it's to make him feel better I don't know, a sudden awkwardness to our conversation; but I shuffle along the bench 'till I'm leaving enough space for someone else to sit in between us, fiddling with my earphones as I try to untangle them, wishing I could think of something right to say.

"Tell me about you, what you've been up to, what trouble you've got yourself into?" I could kid myself that there's a tenderness to his question, as if it pleases him that I'm still me but his eyes are hard belying the slight upturn of his mouth; a contradiction that he still expects me to be a gobshite.

"Me trouble, nah, I've been good. Learnt my lesson didn't I?"

"Don't believe that for a minute, surely in the last couple of years you've fought some cause for someone, oh I don't know, wound up your CO, met someone?"

My eyes are fixed on his adam's apple, watching it as it bobs down 'n' back up, then I let my eyes drift up towards his, again there's nothing there behind his expression to tell me if I imagined the slight discomfort in his voice when he asked if I'd met someone. "Fraid I've got nothing interesting to tell you, I've not even been up on a charge."

In my head there's millions of things I could tell him. That I've got an A level - shit grade but at least I know some decent words now and I'd wanted to do it so that if he ever came back he would be proud of me, that I could tell him that his belief in me had made me want to

be someone better. I want to tell him that Smurf is shagging my flatmate 'n' I've got to listen to them all the time and see his face light up with humour 'cause like me he'd see the funny side of it and then of course that there's a bloke called Bill who's kept me going all these years 'n' I think he'd really like him but I keep quiet, shy for once in my life trying to think of some safe conversation 'cause with all of the above at some point it would come back to how hard it's been without him. "I don't want to ask if your alright.. 'cause I know that you ain't 'n' it's a stupid question but" I stress the word, peaking at him out the side of my eye. "On a scale of 1-10 how shit is it to be back?"

"Offffff good question." Uncrossing his arms for a second he leans over towards me, his fingers centimetres away on the wooden bench, I almost want to reach over grab them, a magnetic pull towards them, but he's watching me, still, waiting for me to look back at him as he looks at me as if he hasn't put in enough effort; that he's failed. "I'd say at least a 12. It's good to be back obviously, preferably, but well I'm not used to being the centre of attention."

"Didn't get that impression when you were swinging a microphone around in your hand 'n' refusing to let anyone else up on that stage."

The soft morning sunlights warming his face, shielding the visual evidence of the last 2 years as he smiles, his perfect cheekbones rising before he exhales, shaking his head as if he's remembered something. "You were beautiful that night. Not that you weren't always but, think it was the first time I realised that you were a little bit insecure."

"What you liked that?"

"It was cute." A flicker of sentiment lights up his eyes. "It made a change from you always thinking you were bloody right." He turns towards me, his eyes hovering over my face as if he's finally seeing me. "I wanted to protect you"

"You did that alright."

There's a slight crinkle at the corner of his eyes before his face falls, his eyes softening to the point I want to give him a hug. "Anyway, I can't pick up a newspaper or switch on the news without fear that I'm going to be on it, if I attempt to go to the shops there's someone wanting to take my picture."

"That does sound a bit shit 'n' you know your luck."

"What?"

"This" This time I'm bolder; leaning over and circling my finger near his face. "Is gonna' take off 'n' everyone's gonna' be gagging to have a beard like that. They'll call it the Charles or something or possibly the Charlie."

"You didn't just say that did you?" He wants to laugh, his teeth clamping into his bottom lip as he watches me giggle like a schoolkid, his head shaking as if he can't believe I had the nerve. "The first time you say my fucking name and not only do you laugh butâ€¦ I'm going to kill my mother."

"I like it, it suits you."

The soft chuckle that's melting my heart stops suddenly as if somewhere he's just pressed an off switch, his head tilting to the side as he watches me, the deep v between his eyebrows deepening. "I need to ask you something, and I don't want you to feel that you have to because you don't okay? I'd understand." I nod but already I know that I'm gonna' say yes. "I'm shit company, some days I'd rather not even speak, would prefer to stay in my bed and not face life and I know that I'm grumpy and irrational. I hate it. Can't seem to help it or do anything about it. But I don't want to be alone. I can't." For the first time he lets me see a glimpse of his vulnerability.

"I've told you I'll do anything."

"What even go away with me for a week, put up with me, knowing that I'm probably never going to be able to have a relationship with you orâ€|."

"Without a doubt. 'Cause we're more than that ain't we?"

"Are we?"

"I'll always be here for you 'cause I know it's all fucked up what with what happened but at the end of the day I care for you 'n' if there's anything I can do to help I'll do it. Just remember that I've had to put up with months of you being my bleedin' CO 'n' bossing me about all the time - what could be worse than that."

"Suppose you have a point but don't"

"And for part of that you didn't even like me."

I almost jump at the connection of his thumb on my cheek, doing everything to not lean into the surprising contact, I need to be the strong one don't I? That's what Smurf said, so I stay still watching him, taking the positive out of the fact that he's here with me. "Don't care for me too much. I'm broken Molly."

Nodding, 'cause the only answer to that is that we both are, and that's not a conclusive list, there's loads of names I could add from the fall out that day. "The last sunrise I ever saw was with you." My cheek feels bare when the contact goes, as if his thumb belonged there, closing my eyes I sigh, turning towards the offending sun which has had no respect for him having been gone, rising and setting every sodding day without him. "Couldn't bare to watch them, didn't seem right." For the first time in 2 and a half years I focus on the orange star, trying to appreciate it's beauty as it continues its journey above the horizon.

"Ditto?"

My eyes snap shut again tightly, trying to stop the feeling that I'm gonna' cry at the all too familiar word that has somehow over the years become the most romantic thing ever said, swallowing making sure that there ain't gonna' be any emotion in my voice as I ask. "So when we going?" I steal myself to look at him, seeing his gaze fixed on the distance, his face tight as if he's annoyed with himself.

"As soon as you can get leave organised. I'll text you, then you've got my number." He starts to move, standing and for a minute I think he's just gonna' walk away then he turns and looks down at me. "What you up to for the rest of the day?"

Smiling at his attempt at normal conversation I start to put my earphones in, I'm gonna let him go first, then it won't be as if I'm following him or anything. "I need to go and see Bill, he's got a shop, a newsagents, it's just his arthritis has been playing up 'n' I normally pop in and give him a hand, his wife died a couple of years ago 'n'... why you laughing at me?"

"You haven't changed have you?" He doesn't give me the chance to answer; exhaling a snort. "I'll look forward to hearing from you and thank you Molly."

I watch him as he walks away, he'd die if he knew that already I was missing him. "SIR?" His body tenses first before he pivots; his hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans as he looks at me warily. "Do you want me to bring the razors or will you?"

Ahh thank you for being patient! Sorry but sometimes real life does unfortunately need to come before my love of playing with words. Thanks for reading and as always for your support. x

9. I'm Fading

Thanks everyone for your continued support :) xx

"I don't think gin compliments cola." The sound of his voice startles me, instinctively turning towards him as I feel the offending liquid land on my hand at my jolting movement. He's watching me; the usual guarded expression on his face as he attempts a smile. I can tell that he's shattered, the bags under his eyes almost violet with the effort of a day's travelling and god knows when he last slept. I'd watched him on the ferry as he'd fought against his eyes shutting as if he was scared to go to sleep, wishing that I could have gone over to him and hugged him or sang him a lullaby like what I'd do with one of the little ones at home.

"Not a very secret stash is it then?" He shakes his head in agreement, raising his eyebrows as he walks towards me and takes the glass out of my hand, sipping it, wincing, handing it back to me and looking at the view that I'd previously been mesmerised with before he'd come through. "Your mum said that I needed to replace it. She didn't think she could get through a holiday with your dad without it." She'd also told me loads of other things, her voice low as she'd helped me put stuff in the back of the car, her eyes flitting with worry towards her son, then in the middle of something serious that would make me swallow trying to keep away the panic of mucking it all up; of not supporting him she'd drop something in like the alcoholic drink stash under the sink or the piles of trashy novels in the basket in the third bedroom.

At last I get the first genuine snort of the day. His eyes sparkling for a minute as he looks down at me, his mouth imitating a smile. "Not too good that you've hit it on the first night is it?"

I'm not sure what to say, instead I go back to watching the view,

something comforting about the white tipped waves breaking over some rocks under the sea, a moodiness to them that I never get in Clacton. "I made some dinner."

"Sorry I'm not very hungry."

"It's alright it'll keep." 8pm and I'm unsettled, in a strange place with someone who I have a heartfull of love for but don't really know. I'm hungry too, hadn't wanted to eat without him but now feel that I can't, wondering if I could get away with a bowl of cereal, if he would hear the sound of my munching from his room next to mine, feel uncomfortable that 'cause of him I hadn't had any dinner.

"I've missed that."

"What?" I ask confused 'cause he's looking at me as he says it and I'm sure it ain't the gin and coke which is the only thing I'm holding.

"Your West Ham top."

With that one statement I've forgiven him, not that I was seriously in a mood with him or anything, just that I'd seen the side of him that he'd talked about; his mum had talked about, where he went 8 hours in a car without speaking a word 'n' if I dared to say anything he'd looked at me like I'd just informed him that I'd maybe not packed something important in my med bergen. "I've missed that."

"What?"

"That cheeky look that you do so well." He looks embarrassed, a flush of red making it's way up his neck. A silence falls over us again, this cottage does quiet well, only the hum of the fridge in the background whilst outside the french doors nature's practically having a bleedin' rave. I'm not sure that I get this place, can't see why someone would choose to come here unless they were a hermit or something. "So do your parents own this place?"

"No, this is my Aunts', my parents have a place in Lake Garda."

"Could we not have gone bleedin' there, warm air for a start."

"Sorry." He says that a lot I'm noticing, almost by default that he's gonna' be in the wrong or has done something he needs to apologise for rather than the old him who'd have come out with some smart reply that would have had me giggling. "I couldn't have coped with the flight or the apartment, too many people about." The back of his neck is being massaged as he smiles at me, as if he's begging for me to understand. Of course I do, inside I'm kicking myself for being brash; for taking the piss. I hold my empty glass up, offering to get him one too, but he shakes his head looking away from me as he stares outside. My footsteps are loud as I walk across to the island, glad when I get there that I can turn and look at him as I start to pour my drink. I'm just about to ask him if there's anything I can get him when he tenses, his whole body becoming one mass of tightened muscles. "You did shut the gate didn't you?"

"Was I meant to?"

"For fuck sake Molly I specifically told you to shut the gate after we drove in."

"I can't remember." I wonder if the shop is open 24 hours, I'm maybe needing something stronger. "Why?"

"There's sheep in the garden."

"They're everywhere on this island." Replying I take a gulp of neat gin.

"That's why we shut the gate." He reaches the door and turns towards me, his face set with anger. "Have you lost the ability to listen to a simple instruction."

I really can't see what damage a few sheep can do but sensibly I follow him, leaving the warmth of the kitchen and reaching up for a jacket, putting my feet into welly boots that are probably 3 sizes too big but at least they close the gap between my pyjama shorts and my bare legs. As he opens the door, a gust of wind brings in a batch of leaves that swirl around before landing at his feet, he shoots me a dirty look as if that's my fault too, raising one eyebrow as he looks down at me. "Can you remember to shut this fucking door behind you?" And without waiting for an answer he goes; as if he can't bear to wait for me. I'm a few paces behind him wondering what the fuck I'm gonna' do; I don't exactly have an affinity with nature.

Like naughty kids the offending woollies take one look at him and scarper, comically baaing to each other as they go - a panicked bottleneck at the gaily swinging open gate before with a final push they're all free and I can turn and look at the now empty garden. With a nervous snort I look up at him, trying really hard not to giggle even with my top teeth painfully dug into my bottom lip - there's only one thing to say. "Shit." And then I laugh. There is literally hundreds of sheep shit. You can't move for sheep shit.

"It's not funny." The rain has dampened his curls, a drop of water dripping down his nose as we stand, staring at each other, his breathing is laboured whether from the stress or the few strides he'd taken around the walled garden to encourage a few stragglers I don't know but it's warmed up his complexion 'n' there's just a little hint of his mouth turning upwards as he turns away and surveys the scene, only looking back when I get my giggling under control. "You've got a lot of shit to clear up Dawesy."

Raising a challenging eyebrow towards him I turn and head back to the porch, the heat nipping my cold legs as I find what I was looking for. He's still standing in the same position when I return, a look of disbelief on his face as I twirl the kids beach spade in my hand; with a professional - in my opinion - flick I get the first of many shits over the garden wall, moving onto the next one. "Buttlins 2008 Tiddlywinks Champion. The only real holiday I ever had before my dad went off on the sick 'n' we couldn't afford anymore."

"You've only had one holiday?" He has to shout to get his voice over the strengthening blustering wind, coming over and taking my pink spade out of my hands, kneeling down as he flicks one over into the

field, smiling up at me as he hands me it back, watching my mouth as he waits for an answer.

"Yeah, loved it though. Quality not quantity as they say. Good memories." I get rid of another 3 before he takes another shot, this one being caught by the wind just as it was about to clear the wall, he walks over to it, every few steps turning to me as if wanting me to elaborate. "There weren't as many of us then neither. Just me and my sisters and one brother before they decided they wanted a bleeding football team."

He returns to my side and hands me the spade back. "Must of been hard."

"Nah didn't know any better did I? Thought it was normal, didn't realise they were rich buggers in the world whose parents or family had holiday homes all over the world."

"I always wanted a brother, or days I was really desperate a sister, holidays were always a bit boring?"

I shiver, the battering rain and wind finally seeping through to my skin. "I craved boredom, would never get a minutes peace." He's moved closer so I'm having to tip my chin up to stare into his eyes that are finally exposing what's going on inside as if he's not got the strength to hide anything from me.

"An only child is a lonely child." He says sadly, exhaling a breath. "When I was out there, sometimes i'd think that everyone would have forgotten about me, that I wouldn't be in anyone's thoughts. Spend hours imagining everyone getting on in their lives, having given up on me."

"Never. Not one minute, even when I was sleeping I'd dream about you."

Taking one step back, he studies me as if trying to see if my expression is saying anything different then he's cocking his head to the side. "Come on let's go back inside, you look frozen."

"You believe me - don't you?" I don't think he does, like it's easier clinging onto the sadness rather than the hope which might lead to some happiness, his head dipped away from me so that I can't read him. "Cause you'd better or I'll tell everyone that you left the gate open." His laugh is carried away on a gust but it's there. "And I'll tell them that you never managed to get one shit over the wall with your pink girly spade."

"Oh Dawes, fighting talk." He opens the door, this time waiting for me to be in the warmth before closing it behind him, isolating us in the comfort of the house; taking my sodden jacket off me and hanging it up. "I'll tell mum that you drank her best gin with cola."

"Yeah and tell her it tasted rank." I head over to the cooker, turning the gas on. "Tell you what, I'm starving after all that hard work." His hands come onto my shoulders, heat travelling along my arms as he gently tugs me away, his mouth coming closer to my ear.

"How about as an apology for being such a dick today you go get a

shower, get heated up and I'll sort this."

Nodding I turn to face him, reaching up, stroking his cheek then I put my hands on my hips; starting to walk backwards. "Just a bit of early holiday dick waving always happens."

Xx-xx

The kitchen has that haziness of condensation when I come back in, the windows steamed up as if protecting us from the darkness outside making the table set with glasses of wine romantic. I almost want to pinch myself that I'm here, with him. He smiles briefly going back to draining the pasta, motioning to a seat with his head. There's only minutes before he's setting a plate in front of me, sitting himself down but it's been long enough for my overactive imagination to pretend that we are a couple 'n' that afterwards we'll cuddle up on the couch or something.

He shovels a mouthful of perfectly wound round his fork pasta into his mouth; taking a sip of wine and smiling at me. "Who'd ever have thought when we first met at Brize that one day I'd be making you dinner."

"Well technically I made the dinner." I'm regretting my choice of food as it happens 'cause unlike him I can't seem to get it into my gob without smearing my face with it or leaving half a ton of spaghetti hanging out, using the opportunity of taking a sip of wine to try and wipe some sauce off my chin - it ain't attractive. In the end I take a few sips, aware that he's watching me the whole time, nervously trying not to flirt with him as I do my best impression of a pissed off Sandhurst educated officer. "So let's have this conversation when you make me dinner, shall we?"

"Anyway it's good to have some quality time together." He interrupts; grinning as he repeats words that I've said previously to him as if he's enjoying this game, going back to eating his dinner with a smile still on his face, seconds passing before he looks across and catches me staring at him, his expression softens as he puts down his fork, "I've been thinkingâ€|"

"Oh dear that does sound dangerous James. You've been thinking about your beard again ain't you?"

"I have."

"Well, we have a duty of care andâ€|." I make a show of thinking of a solution. "...If you feel that it's compromising your stunning good looks then we've got a moral obligation to do something about itâ€|"

"What we gonna' do?" He asks softly.

"Well your gonna', I mean you're going to finish that delicious meal that ****I**** cooked for you, pour yourself and me another glass of wine and let's get it on."

"Get it on?."

"Off, get it off," I practically shout as I stand to take my plate away, my face burning with embarrassment at my Freudian slip. "I

meant get it off."

His tongue is trapped in the side of his mouth as he fights his bloody amusement at my discomfort, his head going from side to side. "I'm not sure that sounds any better."

"Piss off Jamesy, you know what I meant."

"Jamesy? I must be winning you round with my grumpiness and evident lack of humour."

In the end I lie back in the empty bath, two finished bottles of wine sitting beside the tap as I watch him shaving, not saying anything as the last few months of stress is stripped from his face. His gaze finds mine in the mirror, a half wink making me move some facial muscles into a smile. "I've missed you." I whisper. Waiting as he continues the motions with the razor, holding my breath as he turns, wiping his face on the towel as he leans over towards me, closing my eyes as his lips are pressed into my forehead, held there as if he's speaking silently then he pulls back and holds his hand out to me, helping me keep my balance as slightly tipsy I clamber out the tub.

"Think it's time you hit your pit Dawes." He stands back as if he's awkward, releasing the contact as soon as it's safe to do so. "Can't have you half arsing around tomorrow because you've not had enough sleep."

I mock salute, stepping around him. "I've still got fuckin' sheep shit to deal with 'n' I'll tell you something for nothing I ain't gonna' relax till there ain't one teeny, tiny bit ofâ€|."

"The antidote for 50 enemies is one friend." He looks surprised as if he's not sure why the words left his mouth. "Aristotle said that." Frowning he explains, his mouth opening to say something else but I'm quicker;

"You ain't friends with someone 'cause of circumstances or guilt, it's cause as long as they're alive the world is a better place to be 'n' if they weren't; well they would have left such a legacy that if you took away the sadness 'n' the anger that they'd gone they would have made you a better person." Curtseying I look up at him "I said that.", hiccuping, screwing my face up. "Can we get some vodka tomorrow, I don't think that wines agreeing with me."

"We maybe need to disagree on that." He snorts, as if he's a combination of amused and confused. "Goodnight Molly andâ€|. Thank you."

"Your welcome Sir 'n' just so you know." Holding onto the frame of the door for balance I give my best smile, "when you wake me up in the morning I like teaâ€|"

"Two sugars and easy on the milk.. How could I forget."

That's strange. "You never ever bleedin' made me a cup."

"Piss off Dawesy and just so you know seeing as you never made me aâ€|."

"Coffee, and don't pollute the delicate taste with sugar or milk, yeah yeah I know. Goodnight." My bedroom door shuts behind me, replaying the sound of his chuckle over 'n' over in my head as I lean against the door; already I'm missing him.

End
file.